DISPATCH FEBRUARY 25, 2020

RUSSIA'S MAIN OBJECTIVE IS NOT TO SOW DISCORD; IT'S TO REELECT TRUMP.

Russia's main objective in 2020 is the same it was in 2016. That objective isn't simply to sow discord; it is, as the US Intelligence concluded in 2017, to elect Donald Trump.

Yet recent CNN reporting based on leaks from "national security officials" claims that an intelligence community official "overstated" Russia's support for Trump in a February 13 briefing to Congress that reportedly prompted Trump to fire his acting director of national intelligence.

This is absurd. Russia ran a campaign to help elect Trump in 2016. Asserting that Russia is not helping Trump in 2020 ignores everything that has happened over the past four years. Russia helped Trump. Trump helped Russia. Now they are doing it again. What the CNN story really seems to show is that Trump's efforts to intimidate the intelligence community and U.S. law enforcement for his own personal benefit is working.

The intelligence community revealed all the way back in January 2017 that Russia ran an influence campaign to help Trump win election in 2016.

- The most groundbreaking finding in the January 6, 2017, intelligence community assessment is that Russia was not merely trying to sow discord within American politics in 2016 but was in fact explicitly trying to help Trump win the election. The assessment states not only that the hack and release of emails reflected "a clear preference for President-elect Trump" but also that Russia had deployed a vast online propaganda network for the same purpose.
- That is why Russia hacked both the Democratic and Republican national committees but only released the emails it had stolen from Trump's political opponents.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin himself confirmed this finding in his infamous Helsinki press conference with Trump. When asked if he had wanted Trump to win in 2016, Putin said: "Yes, I did. Because he talked about bringing the U.S.-Russia relationship back to normal."
- The Mueller report also notes that as Trump solidified his position as the Republican nominee, the Kremlin-backed Internet Research Agency (IRA) tailored its propaganda efforts to support Trump. The report states, "By early to mid-2016, IRA operations included supporting the Trump Campaign and disparaging candidate Hillary Clinton."

- The Mueller report also confirms that the theft and release of emails from the Clinton campaign was meant to help Trump in the election. According to the report, "The release of the documents was designed and timed to interfere with the 2016 U.S. presidential election and undermine the Clinton Campaign."

Trump's presidency has been a boon for Putin.

- Since taking office, President Trump has instituted policies both at home and abroad that feed into Putin's agenda, including by degrading the transatlantic alliance, downgrading human rights, and destabilizing America from within.
  - For a comprehensive breakdown of how Trump's presidency has been a boon for Russia, see "Putin's Payout: 12 Ways Trump has Supported Putin's Foreign Policy Agenda."

We already know that Russia is trying to help Trump in 2020 as well.

- Months ago, the intelligence community briefed Congress that the Kremlin was behind the conspiracy theory that Ukraine, not Russia, interfered in the 2016 election. Ahead of the 2020 election, Trump and his defenders have embraced this and other debunked allegations about the Russia investigation, both as a defense against fallout from the Mueller report and as a weapon against their political opponents.
- Russian intelligence reportedly hacked into Burisma Holdings, the Ukrainian energy company at the center of Trump's debunked allegations against former Vice President Joe Biden, a move obviously intended to help Trump if Biden wins the Democratic nomination.
- Unlike Sen. Bernie Sanders (D-VT), who immediately denounced Putin following reports that Russia may seek to boost his candidacy, Trump has signaled his willingness to collude with Russia yet again. Most notably, he told ABC News' George Stephanopoulos that he would accept information on political opponents from foreign governments, all while secretly trying to extort Ukraine for dirt on one of his potential rivals.

Government agencies have sounded the alarm bells for Russian interference. Trump not only hasn't acted on their warnings; he's disputed and undermined their conclusions.

- Administration officials have been warning about Russian interference in 2020 for more than a year:

  - In January 2019, then-Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats warned that "foreign actors [including Russia] will view the 2020 U.S. elections as an opportunity to advance their interests," adding: "We expect them to refine their capabilities and add new tactics as they learn from each other's experiences and efforts."
  - In September 2019, then-acting Director of National Intelligence Joseph Maguire described the need to "maintain the integrity of our election system," stating: "We know right now that there are foreign powers that are trying to get us to question the validity of whether or not our elections are valid." Maguire identified the interference efforts of Russia and China as one of the greatest challenges facing the intelligence community.
  - In July 2019, FBI Director Christopher Wray told the Senate Judiciary Committee: "The Russians are absolutely intent on trying to interfere with our elections ... until they stop they haven't been deterred enough."

  - Later that month, special counsel Robert Mueller echoed Wray's warning in his own testimony, telling Congress that Russia is "doing it as we sit here. And they expect to do it during the next campaign."
  - And Chris Krebs, who heads the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, said in November, "The Russians will—are continuing to try to destabilize—our form of government and just our way of life, in general."
- In the face of all of these warnings, Trump has actively disputed whether Russia attacked American democracy to begin with and is now making it easier for them to do so in 2020.

National security adviser Robert O'Brien demonstrated why the Trump White House is undermining the obvious truth that Russia wants Trump to win in 2020. In interviews with both ABC News' George Stephanopoulos and CBS News' Margaret Brennan, O'Brien downplayed the evidence of Russia's preference for Trump while transparently attempting to stoke suspicion surrounding Sanders.

In other words: The White House is actively undermining the intelligence community to protect the president and attack his political opponents.